



# Fact Sheet

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## Pertussis (Whooping Cough)

Pertussis, or whooping cough, is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bordetella pertussis*. In the 20th century, pertussis has been one of the most common childhood diseases and a major cause of childhood death in the United States. Before vaccine became available in the 1940s, more than 200,000 cases of pertussis were reported annually. Since widespread use of the vaccine began, the number of diseases has dropped to about 4,400 cases per year since 1980. In unimmunized populations in the world, pertussis remains a major health problem among children, with an estimated 300,000 deaths per year due to the disease.

- Infants are at highest risk for the disease. Teens, adults and those partially protected by the vaccine may become infected, but usually have milder disease. Pertussis in these people may present as a persistent cough and resemble other upper respiratory infections.
- People get pertussis by contact with respiratory droplets or by contact with airborne respiratory secretions.
- Pertussis may increase in the summer and fall.
- Symptoms of pertussis commonly occur seven to 10 days after exposure, but could begin as long as 21 days after exposure.
- Pertussis is highly infectious, especially within 21 days of symptoms starting. Household contacts of the patient are highly likely to be infected.
- Symptoms start with a runny nose, sneezing, low-grade fever, and a mild, occasional cough, similar to the common cold. The cough gradually becomes more severe, and after one to two weeks, the patient has bursts of numerous, rapid coughs and eventually will have a high-pitched “whoop.” Vomiting and exhaustion commonly follow the episode.
- South Carolina requires vaccination against pertussis for admission to school and day care. No vaccine is available for people over age 7. It can be treated with antibiotics.
- In 1997-2000, 20 per of all reported pertussis cases required hospitalization, including 63 percent of all infants under 6 months of age. In this four-year period, 62 deaths were due to pertussis. Fifty-six (90 percent) of these deaths occurred in children less than 6 months of age
- In 2002, South Carolina had 48 cases of pertussis.